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**Kingdoms, Communities, and Óenaig: Irish Assembly Practices in their Northwest European Context**

By Patrick Gleeson

**Abstract** - This paper explores the nature of assembly practices in early medieval Ireland (AD 400–1100). It focuses specifically on the óenach, the pre-eminent assembly of each level of community and kingdom in Irish society, and it engages critically with how assembly as a topic has been traditionally understood and analyzed by Irish scholarship. Through analysis of the nature of the óenach, I suggest that the predominantly economistic interpretation of this institution by Irish scholarship is misplaced and that rather the óenach was an Irish equivalent of pan-European assembly practices. Accordingly, this paper explores the character of óenaig (plural of óenach) in the context of this pan-European phenomenon. Furthermore, some preliminary results from ongoing research offer insights into the archaeological manifestation of assembly practices, the spatial dynamic of assembly landscapes, and the implications of the same for our understanding of civil society, scales of identity, and the practice of assembly in early medieval Ireland.

**Introduction**

 Almost a century ago, the great revolutionary scholar Eoin MacNeill (1921:110) lamented that “hardly studied at all as yet, nowhere studied systematically, is the subject of the public assemblies of ancient Ireland”. Despite MacNeill’s formative role in the study of early Ireland, its people and political structures, understandings of the assembly places and practices of early medieval society (AD 400–1100) have improved little in the interim. With few exceptions (e.g., FitzPatrick 2001, 2004), the institution of assembly has been remarkably under-researched, especially in contrast to the importance accorded assembly practices elsewhere in north-western Europe. Scholars of early medieval Ireland face many of the intractable, daunting issues that scholars of civil society and assembly elsewhere in Europe grapple with, namely the archaeological dimension of assembly and the difficulties associated with identifying assembly places systematically on a large scale (cf. Sanmark and Semple 2013). Fortunately, the extent to which these issues have been analyzed by European colleagues, including those involved in The Assembly Project, suggests pan-European patterns as well as important regionalities and variation in cultures of assembly, which make addressing these issues considerably easier. This paper stems from research I carried out as a part of The Óenach Project, which engages with the need to clearly identify assembly places for early medieval Ireland on a systematic basis. More specifically, given this special volume’s thematic parameters, this contribution focuses on elucidating the nature of early Irish assembly practices by defining the character and function of institutions like the óenach (plural: óenaig). As such, the monumental iconography of assembly places and the archaeological footprint of assembly will be less prominent themes below; my intention here is rather to critically assess scholarly and popular perceptions of assembly in early Ireland through placing these practices within their European context. Through that prism, I want to examine societal norms and power structures and how the same were implicated in economic activity and the construction of different scales of identity.

**Defining Assembly in Early Medieval Ireland**

While assembly is a term permeating scholarship on royal landscapes, kingship, and society in later prehistoric and medieval Ireland, the manner in which “assembly” has tended to feature is generic and all too often problematic. A threefold hierarchy of kings defined early medieval Irish kingship, and although codified by the law-tracts during the 7th–8th century AD, that hierarchy is at least as old as the 5th century, when it was articulated in the confessio of St. Patrick (Ó Corráin 2010:284–286). In ascending order, this ranged from a local petty king, to a king who was the overking of a number of petty kings, to the highest grade of king, one who was the overlord of several overkings. While this idealized structure does not automatically preclude additional scales of polity and community (below), a model of early Irish polities can nevertheless expect that each level or scale in that hierarchy had a caput, a place associated with inauguration, and a locus of assembly (Gleeson, in press a). Within that model, these functions could be found vested in a single landscape (e.g., Mag Adhair; FitzPatrick 2004:52–59), but are more commonly found to be dispersed, either associated with distinct locations within an extensive royal estate, or within discreet landscapes spread throughout a kingdom (Gleeson 2014, in press d).
For instance, the landscapes of Tara and Cashel were places of paramount ceremonial and inauguration, and yet, neither landscape is associated with the regular or institutionalized assemblies of their respective kingdoms; their assembly landscapes were, respectively, Óenach Tailtiu (Teltown, County Meath; Swift 2000) and Óenach Clochar (Knocklong/Clogherbeg, Knocklong parish, County Limerick; Gleeson, in press c; Ó Riain et al. 2003:62–63). Descriptions of such landscapes as assembly places and, more particularly, venues of òenáig (e.g., MacCotter 2008:50) are therefore unwarranted. While understandable in the context of the historiography of Irish kingship and royal landscapes (cf. FitzPatrick 2004), such attributions are only tenable within out-moded models of Irish kingship.

The study of early Irish kingship can be divided into two schools: those who study the practice of kingship and the powers exercised by kings, and those who study the kingship’s ceremonial and ideological dimension. While generally the former is the preserve of historians, archaeologies of kingship most confidently and predominantly engage with the latter. The sundering of these two inter-related themes is debilitating, and apart from ensuring the subordination of archaeological narratives to models derived from historical research, it completely fails to engage with the spatial nature of authority and its constant reproduction. Furthermore, this disjuncture represents one of the principal reasons why assembly has, to date, been analyzed generically and why Irish kings are seen to have been less powerful than European contemporaries (cf. Binchy 1970, Charles-Edwards 2009, Wormald 1986). As such, the uncritical manner in which assembly has tended to be analyzed by Irish scholars (e.g., Gleeson 2012, Johnston and Wailes 2007) not only misunderstands the nature of assembly, it fails to engage with the spatial complexity of royal landscapes and how different locales within these arenas articulated together to create landscapes of governance through which power was exercised.

Prior to any examination of the role of assembly in the exercise of kingship, however, it is convenient firstly to engage with the issue of defining different categories and scales of assembly in early medieval Ireland. Just as the early Irish hierarchy of kings made for relativities of kingliness, so too were there different types of assembly, some closely proscribed and convened for specific purposes, but all of which were entwined within structures and practices of assembly appropriate to different scales of polity and community. The Old Irish lexicon for assemblies included terms like òenáig, airecht, tionol, cét, dál, món-dál, ríg-dál, and comdál, all of which signified types of assembly. Similarly, assembly places could be signified by toponymic terms including drung, dál, forrach, and òenach. These types of assembly could fulfill distinct purposes; a ríg-dál, for example, was an exceptional assembly convened between kings for the specific purposes of realpolitik. Although this diverse lexicon may describe different types of assembly, it seems that such gatherings were nevertheless convened at traditional assembly places: locales set apart by communities for the purpose of assembly. For instance, the earliest instance of a ríg-dál is the late 6th-century convention of Druim Cét between the kings of Cenél Conaill and Dál Riata (Sharpe 1995:120–121). Druim Cét incorporates the assembly term cét, and thus literally means “ridge of assembly”. It is usually agreed that this was the townland of Mullaghs on the bank of the river Roe south of Limavaddy, County Derry (Lacey 2006:201–203). On the opposite (eastern) bank of the river Roe is Enagh townland, which incorporates the toponymic element òenáig, identifying this as the òenach-assembly place of Ciannacht Glinne Geimin (Gleeson 2014:885–886). The conjunction of a ríg-dál-type assembly, an early medieval cét place-name and an òenáig toponym illustrate the degree to which different categories of assembly practice overlapped within distinct “multi-purpose” landscapes; this arrangement, as much as anything else, probably reflects how assembly landscapes were appropriate to different scales of assembly simultaneously.

While there was a complexity of assembly practices, it is relatively certain that the òenach was the most important form of assembly in early medieval society. Òenáig were convened by a king on mruguí rig, which was “royal land/estate(s)” representing the prerogative of the office of kingship (Kelly 1997:403). As kingship in Ireland was fundamentally vested in places, this mruguí rig constituted the pre-eminent symbol of regality. Thus, any attempt to locate and define an assembly landscape is simultaneously to account for and compose a land-holding system.

As a term, òenáig is a derivative of òen, “one”, explicitly articulating a concept of unification derived from this being the principal assembly of a kingdom and/or community, wherein ties of allegiance, kinship and political economy were negotiated, agreed, and renewed. Nevertheless, by far the most common understanding of the Irish òenáig is that it was an essentially economic institution, an understanding embodied in the usual translation as “market/fair” (cf. Binchy 1958; Gwynn 1913, 1924; Jaski 2000:49–56).

This economic understanding of òenáig as essentially the market institution of early Ireland was articulated most forcefully by Charles Doherty
(1985), who argued that the *óenach* was essentially a sacral gathering of the tribe, which, from the 7th century onwards, was slowly adopted/usurped by the church as ecclesiastical establishments developed proto-urban functions. Somewhere within that process, the *óenach* was metamorphosed to a simple market, which thus re-imagined the economic and trade functions of a pre-urban society. Similarly, Simms (1987:63) goes so far as to state that the evolution from a secular to ecclesiastical *óenach* meant that such gatherings lost whatever political significance they once possessed, as they were no longer presided over by kings. The understanding of the *óenach* articulated in these assessments is simplistic, highly problematic, and not borne out by the evidence; there was no necessary dichotomy between secular and ecclesiastical *óenaig*, and the association of ecclesiastical establishments with assembly places originated at least as early as the conversion period (Gleeson 2014, in press a; cf. Swift 2000).

Recently, in a lucid critique of Doherty’s thesis, Colman Etchingham (2010) has reverted to F.J. Byrne’s (1973:30–31) definition of *óenai*: “[The *Óenach* –] was an important event in the calendar of a rural society, and was at once political assembly, market-fair ... and an occasion for general jollification. In fact, it corresponds very closely to the Scandinavian and Icelandic *thing*. Games and horse-racing were an essential element of the *óenach*. There is little doubt that these were funerary in origin, and that the “fair” was held on the site of the ancient tribal cemetery.”

The association of *óenaig* with games, entertainment, and horse and chariot-racing is a point which has come to be specifically emphasized by recent scholarship (e.g., Etchingham 2010, Gleeson 2002, Kelly 1997:99). This dominant association is already present in the 7th-century *speculum principium*, *Audacht Morainn* (cf. Kelly 1976:8–9), and was indeed so pervasive that *Sanas Cormaic* (composed ca. 900) spuriously derived *óenach* from *óine ech*, literally “to drive horses” (Meyer 1912:86). In fact, there appears to be remarkably little evidence for retaining the economic understanding of an *óenach* as a “market/fair”. While *óenaig* were probably convened on one or more of the festivals that divided the year (i.e., *Imbolc, Samhain, Beltaine*, and *Lughnasad*), they are predominantly associated with *Lughnasad* and, thus, the harvest in early August (MacNeill 1965). As Cathy Swift (2000:116–119) has intimated, this association makes it highly likely that the market/fair understanding of the *óenach* grew out of its role as an occasion where tribute was rendered and redistributed, with trade perhaps being a secondary by-product of such practices, including, for example, the disposal and sale of surplus. This aspect of *óenaig* as places for tribute-taking and gift-giving is explicit in saga literature: the tract on the taboos of the kings of Ireland lists the items to be brought to the king of Tara at *Lughnasad* on the occasion of *Óenach Tailten* (Dillon 1951:8–9), for instance. Support for this aspect of the *óenach* is provided by the archaeology of these landscapes, where evidence for large-scale crop-processing and craft-working finds its best context in the systems of obligation and tribute negotiated and exercised through assembly practices.

First and foremost therefore, the *óenach* was a political institution. Despite the unanimous emphasis on games, entertainment and horse-racing, the sources are equally unambiguous in articulating the legal and judicial functions of *óenaig* from an early date. At an *óenach*, a king would enact a law or ordinance or pledge his people. *Crith Gablach* (ca. 700), for instance, associates *óenaig* with *airecht*, and the late 7th–9th century saw *cain-*laws promulgated over supra-regional kingdoms within major *óenach* landscapes (Binchy 1941:lines 515–524, Charles-Edwards 2000:556–569, Gleeson 2014:718–720). Likewise, *airecht* was a term which came to mean the royal entourage, but which, originally, signified an “assembly” of free-men (*aire*) and a “law-court” (Simms 1987:60). The sources are ambiguous as to whether *airecht* in the sense of a law-courts were normally convened as a part of *óenaig*, but one may agree with Charles-Edwards (2000:559, 2005:342) that it seems likely that such meetings were a normal and indeed integral part of *óenaig*, if only because the powers needed to convene an *airecht*, witness it, and carry out its judgment would normally have coalesced at the time of the *óenach*.

The perception that *óenaig* were essentially funerary games (e.g., Byrne 1973:30–31, Ettlinger 1953) arises from statements in a number of texts that specific *óenaig* were celebrated to commemorate famous ancestral figures (male and female) interred within the “assembly mound”. In an important reassessment of this material, however, Alexandra Bergholm (forthcoming) has shown that the texts which articulate such a genesis are all Middle Irish in date and, furthermore, consciously model an image of Irish assembly culture in the 10th–12th centuries on Classical accounts of the origins of games like the Olympics. Thus, while there is a marked funerary dimension to assembly practices, we must construct more nuanced narratives and engage more critically with that relationship. Rather than the assembly practice being a derivative of a funerary and sepulchral function, both aspects are intimately connected, such that these landscapes were places for
assembling the communities of living and dead from their inception.

An Image of Assembly: The Specter of Imperial Heritage?

Considered together, the functions vested in the óenach suggest that it represents the Irish equivalent of the thing and moot of Scandinavian and “Germanic” communities, respectively, across northwestern Europe, albeit with an important caveat being, that óenaig may be more specifically akin to an althing or shire moot in terms of scale (further below). Byrne (1973) was perhaps uniquely perceptive in highlighting these similarities, with that equation also receiving the imprimatur of more recent scholars (e.g., FitzPatrick 2004). Although the thing is most commonly defined as “an assembly of people with legislative and judiciary authority” (Storli 2010:137), other scholars rather appropriately highlight how saga literature suggests other important activities, including cult, trade, and games or competitions, including horse-racing (Brink et al. 2011:97), while there is also limited but convincing evidence that such associations were a facet of the Anglo-Saxon moot (Pants 2004:166). To note these similarities merely highlights the well-appreciated fact that assembly is a universal facet of civil communities’ functioning and central to the practice of civil society across early medieval northwest Europe.

While the similarities between the iconography and character of assembly places and practices in northwestern Europe is well appreciated and lucidly analyzed in much recent scholarship (e.g., Barnwell and Mostert 2003, Pants and Semple 2004), the specific reasons for such concordance have not always been articulated. This is perhaps particularly true in an Irish context, where the experience of polities and elite culture is often portrayed as singular and insular, thereby perpetuating a myth that Irish kingship was peculiar in a northwest European context.

As in Ireland, power and authority in late antique Europe neither rested solely on hereditary rights, kinship, or military might. Rulers had obligations to provide entertainment, fecundity, and stability, expectations which grew out of late Roman civic culture and concepts of citizen-constituted community. Thus, one of the more famous expressions of royal power in the early Byzantine empire was the circus at Constantinople, important for horse and chariot-racing, and indeed, as an occasion where the Emperor were seen in the midst of the people to be acclaimed and to receive petitions. Gradually, the circus evolved specific imperial associations related to emperor-making ceremonies and the celebration of victories (Barnwell 2005; Cameron 1976:162–163, 182–183; McCormick 1986). As Paul Barnwell (2005:179) notes, so intimate became the Imperial rituals associated with the circus, and indeed, amphitheatres, that “Germanic” rulers of many of the kingdoms which were established in the former western provinces of the Empire imitated Imperial ceremonies at the circus, After regaining Rome in 550 following Justinian’s attempt to take Italy back into the Empire, the king of the Ostrogoths, Totila, held horse-races to celebrate his victory. Theuderic I of the Franks earlier acted similarly after gaining the former Imperial capital of Arles, while in 577 Chilperic I built circuses at his seats of kingship at Paris and Soissons to provide entertainment for the citizens (ibid., Halsall 2007:491).

Thus, it seems that late Roman and early Byzantine cultures of civic community and public entertainment did influence assembly practices and elite culture in the post-Roman world and western provinces to a greater degree than is commonly recognized (cf. Gleeson, forthcoming c; Halsall 2007:488–494). While the image of the óenach presented by the 10th–12th-century literati resulted from particular political exigencies, the Irish had equated óenaig with aspects of classical civic culture from at least the 7th century; terms like agon (Greek: “games/contest”) were used as synonyms for óenach in annals and hagiography (e.g., Bieler 1979:132), and circio, spectaculum, and theatrum were used to gloss, and in place of, óenach in law-tracts, genealogies, and annals (Annals of Ulster 800.3; Hogan 1910:558, O’Brien 1962:230). Although little is known about administration in the late Roman Empire, it has been shown that theaters were used for assembly of citizens where magistrates could be elected by acclamation and where provincial governors could read out imperial letters or transact public business (Barnwell 2005:179–180; Brown 1992:85, 149). The óenaig of early Irish polities may not seem entirely different, and certainly, terms like agon, circio, and theatrum suggests that there is little reason to regard the Irish experience or perception of assembly practices as something independent, peculiar, or indeed, entirely aspirational, particularly when the formative influence of the later Empire upon on the institutions of late Iron Age and early medieval Ireland is increasingly recognized (Gleeson forthcoming c; Newman 1998). This influence permeated religious practices, strategies of self adornment, concepts of rulership, and polity building, and as such, it would seem foolhardy to regard assembly practices as entirely exempt; the fact that a large proportion of Roman material from Ireland comes from landscapes later documented as royal assembly places is pertinent here also (ibid.).
In such a light, it appears a reasonable suggestion that the similarities between aspects of assembly practices in Ireland and elsewhere in northwestern Europe reflect the fact that the specter of an Imperial heritage thoroughly conditioned a burgeoning culture of assembly across the post-Roman West, and moreover, that elites in nascent kingdoms within and without the former Empire moulded and actively constituted their strategies of lordship and practices of assembly as a part of a pan-European phenomenon. This is an important context, both for analyzing óenach during later Antiquity and more generally throughout the early medieval period, but also for interrogating evidence for the material signature and wider structure of assembly practices in northwestern European societies.

Structure and Practice: Defining Assembly Landscapes

Leaving aside issues of the origins and meaning of similarities in assembly practices, further comparisons may be drawn by summarizing some preliminary patterns in the character of assembly landscapes in Ireland. Figure 1 depicts a corpus of ~115 assembly landscapes identified through documentary research and a variety of interdisciplinary methodologies (see Gleeson 2014:808–916). These assembly places are categorized according to the type of evidence indicative of an assembly function, namely a documented óenach, a documented assembly place, an óenach/assembly place indicated by toponymy, and a royal landscape for which an assembly function can justifiably be inferred through a combination of evidence (Gleeson 2014:84–147). Correspondingly, these are mapped here within their local trícha/cantred, as defined by Paul MacCotter (2008). While this presentation allows a reasonable approximation of the administrative geography of Ireland ca. 1100 AD, there is considerable evidence that some trícha céts represent units of land-holding of some antiquity (ibid.). The distribution of assembly places, moreover, clearly suggests a sub-trícha cét structure, where, for instance, more than one assembly place occurs within a trícha cét. This structure reflects the fact that while the majority of trícha céts are identifiable with kingdoms, they might each comprise a number of distinct, semi-autonomous polities.

Contrary to previously dominant evolutionary models of Irish kingship (e.g., Ó Corráin 1978), it now appears unlikely that more-minor kings began to lose the prerogative of kingship from the 7th–8th century, as apparently happened in Anglo-Saxon England (cf. Yorke 1990). Rather, minor lordships retained regal status into the 11th and 12th centuries (see Etchingham 1996:128–136, 1999:146–147; Zumbuhl 2005:275–284). While there were important changes to the practice of kingship in the 7th–9th century, this latter fact has considerable repercussions for the understanding of Irish kingship and society. Although largely outside this paper’s scope, it is important to highlight that evidence for a sub-trícha cét assembly structure most probably reflects the constituent polities of a petty kingdom having retained semi-autonomous governance, and certainly a distinct locus of assembly. In the kingdom of Fir Maige Féine (see MacCotter 2012a) there are two definite assembly places, both of which are located on the royal estates of the major polities of the kingdom documented in Créchadh an Caol, namely Fir Maige Féine and their overlords Síl Cathail (Gleeson 2014:183–185). Similarly, the local kingdom of Uí Fháeláín (as territorial kingdom, rather than dynastic polity) encompassed segments of Dál Messin Corb, Uí Baireirche, Uí Ineochglais, Fothairt, and Dál Corrain Loise (Gleeson and Ó Carragáin, in press), and the high number of assembly places within that unit indicates that these retained autonomous assembly functions within that polity (see Fig. 2).

Likewise, the building blocks of such polities and kingdoms, whether local and petty, or supra-local and/or regional overkingships, were the politico-spatial units known as túatha (plural túatha; see MacCotter 2008, 2012a), and it seems that we must allow that each such unit/polity also maintained a locus of assembly. For instance, the trícha cét of Cenél nÉogain (Inishowen) comprises three túatha, each of which has a distinct place of assembly signified by a drung place-name (Gleeson 2014:185–186, Lacey 2006:114–115, cf. MacCotter 2012b). Considered together, the combined evidence for the perpetuation of a semi-independent assembly practice by both the constituent groups within a polity/kingdom and the túath that comprised the politico-spatial building blocks of such polity/kingdom suggests a need to engage with complex hierarchies and structures of assembly that exist independent of a general assembly (i.e., an óenach). Thus, while an óenach was probably a kingdom’s principal assembly, there were levels of assembly that existed below that principal gathering, some of which may have been quasi-regal. This point receives some support from the law-tracts, where assemblies of túath are alluded to and, moreover, are clearly discreet from higher-order gatherings, presumably óenach (?), at Lugnasad (Binchy 1978:ii. 469. 7–11, 19–23, 29–32 and 471. 22–25).

Although this issue has been either skirted around or ignored by Irish scholars and certainly occluded by debates over the meaning of “túath” within law-tracts (e.g., MacCotter 2008, 2012a; cf. Etchingham
1996; Ó Corráin 1978), the existence of a hierarchy of assemblies is neither unique nor surprising within a northwest European context. In terms of the scale of polity that these tiers relate to, an òenach is probably best regarded as the equivalent of an althing or shire moot of Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon polities, while the lower-order thing or hundred moot relates more readily to assemblies of local túath, if not also the assemblies one may hypothesize for subject communities within petty kingdoms (further Gleeson 2014). This equation, of course, is not an exact science, and the inherently dynamic nature of the early Irish geo-political landscape necessitates a caveat that the scale of assembly such places relate to could change overtime. Nevertheless, appreciating the existence of a tiered structure of interlocking

Figure 1. Map of 115 assembly landscapes (from the catalogue in Gleeson 2014) within their local trícha cét (after MacCotter 2008).
Figure 2. Map showing the number of assembly places alongside evidence for burial within the kingdom of Úi Fháeláin. This density supports identifying a sub-trícha cét structure of assembly for the constituent polities.
scales of assembly is a crucial context for analyzing the archaeology of assembly places and practices in Ireland; the manner in which that scale of assembly finds a spatial expression within assembly landscapes is illuminating.

One emerging theme in research pertaining to assembly across Europe is the use of burial places and sepulchral landscapes for assembly practices. This interpretation has been cogently argued in Northern Britain, Anglo-Saxon England, and Merovingian Gaul, as well as elsewhere, such that, again, this characteristic of assembly practices may be described as a pan-European phenomenon (Brookes and Reynolds 2011, Effros 2002, Halsall 2010:202–231, Maldonado 2013:24, cf. Sanmark and Semple 2013:532–534, Semple 2004, Williams 2004). The Irish evidence is no different and, indeed, may be uniquely robust and early enough that it is capable of demonstrating the existence of assembly structures from at least the 5th-6th century (Gleeson 2014). Particularly, I have argued that recently excavated complexes in Ireland variously termed “cemetery settlements”, “settlement cemeteries”, and/or secular cemeteries (Ó Carragáin 2009, 2010; O’Sullivan et al. 2013; Stout and Stout 2008) are best understood as local túath-level assembly places (Gleeson 2014, in press a; Gleeson and Ó Carragáin, in press). In general terms, these sites consist of a defined burial locus, usually (although not universally) contained within a series of enclosures. This burial locus is normally the focus of a much larger complex that includes the remains of rubbish pits, animal remains, and food waste, most likely from feasting, associated with evidence for craft- and iron-working as well as crop-processing, but for which more conventional evidence for “habitation” in the form of structures and hearths is absent. For present purposes, it is sufficient to note that, apart from the non-burial archaeological assemblage of these sites being best interpreted as evidence for both funerary feasting and assembly practices, there is a significant correlation between assembly landscapes and these locations of burial, whether isolated, inserted into older monuments, or within cemeteries (Fig. 3).

Furthermore, the analysis of these sites within their local territorial, administrative and political frameworks often supports their interpretation as assembly places, and a few brief examples will serve to illustrate that pattern here.

The major assembly landscape of Óenach Carman focuses upon Sillerythil, Carnalway parish, County Kildare (Ó Murchadha 2002), the royal estate of which is demarcated by a number of burial complexes at Corbally, Greenhills, Mullacash, and Coughlanstown (Fig. 4; Coyne 2010; Gleeson and Ó Carragáin, in press; MacCotter in Ó Carragáin and Sheehan 2008:358–361). Likewise, the 5th- to 8th-century cemetery complex at Carrigatogher-Harding (Taylor 2010) is located on the outskirts of Óenach Téite/Aurmuman, while the cemetery complex at Augheraskea (Knockmark parish, County Meath), has also been shown to define the landscape of an Óenach on Knockmark ridge, near the important early royal site of Lagore (Carty and Gleeson 2013:48–55). Support for the identification of such complexes as túath assembly places comes from the fact that the archaeological evidence shows that most such locales remained centers of activity and feasting after burial had ceased, while in a number of cases, such complexes can be associated with specific, documented kin groups. For instance, taking Óenach Carman specifically, the Corbally complex remained a center of activity until at least the 9th/10th century (Coyne 2010), despite adult burial having ceased during the 7th century, while alongside Greenhills, Corbally was likely an assembly place of Ó Gar- cron, a segment of Dál Messin Corb (Gleeson and Ó Carragáin, in press). Likewise, the genealogies of Ó Bairbre record a branch named Ó Langenai, associated with Killashee, but whose caput was Caisse (O’Brien 1962:54); this is Mullacash (from Mullach Caise; Hogan 1910:167–168), where a number of 5th- to 7th-century burials have been excavated adjacent to the parish/royal estate boundary (Ó Riordáin in Cahill and Sikora 2012:55–69, cf. MacCotter in Ó Carragáin and Sheehan 2008:358–61).

As the example of Óenach Carman illustrates, these cemetery complexes frequently cluster together (Figs. 3, 4), defining, delimiting, and demarcating the boundaries of these assembly landscapes and, by implication, their associated royal estates (Gleeson 2014, in press a). The mnuig ríg of the principal assembly of the kingdom of Osraige (Counties Kilkenny and southern Laois), Óenach Roigne, appears to approximate to the parishes of Dunbell, Killfreach, and Grangekilree which spanned the river Nore south of Kilkenny city (see Gleeson, in press a). This landscape had a central royal focus in Dunbell (from Dún Bile, “fort of the [sacred] tree”), but complexes with evidence for 5th- to 6th-century burial at Sheatstown, Kilree 3, Kilree 4, Holdenstown 1, and Holdenstown 2 define its boundaries (Bhreathnach and O’Brien 2011; Gleeson, in press a; Whitty and Tobin 2009). More generally, the burial places within and defining these landscapes are normally located in close proximity to a modern parish boundary (usually less than 600 m; see Gleeson 2014:110–169), which research by Paul MacCotter has shown frequently preserve the structure of early landholding units, often 5th- to 6th-century in origin (Gleeson and Ó Carragáin, in press; MacCotter 2012a; cf. Ó Carragáin, in press).
Importantly, the propensity for these complexes to be situated close to boundaries suggests that they were consciously defining and demarcating assembly landscapes that served to bring communities of the living and dead together. As they cluster together, and were associated with specific kin-groups, it seems clear they were deeply implicated in maintaining local, kin-based identity. We can also consider them as sepulchral landscapes that mapped local kin-based identities onto a topography of assembly that articulated more encompassing scales of polity and community. The decision by the constituent communities of a polity to bury on the royal estate near to its boundaries was something that re-imagined and sanctified that office and estate for those communities through the passing of generations. Notably, this was by the internment therein of the corporeal fabric of the body politic, such that the

Figure 3. Map of 115 assembly places in Ireland within their local tricha cét, with places showing evidence for early medieval burial also shown.
royal estate, the pre-eminent symbol of regality, was also an emotive and consistent symbol of an identity shared by diverse communities subject to a single political suzerain.

These patterns allow a working model to be proposed: early Irish assembly landscapes could have a core royal focus, but were, nevertheless, extensive and poly-focal, with a multiplicity of nodal points of activity, such that each constituent element of a polity had their own discreet place of assembly within the broader landscape. Given that these nodal points are located on, near, and defining royal estates, that

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Figure 4. Map showing the royal demesne of Óenach Carman (after MacCotter in Ó Carragáin et al. 2008:358–361). Note the concentration of burial places around the estate boundary.
estate should be regarded as having approximated in its entirety to the assembly landscape. To return to the analogy of a tua th-scale assembly approximating to a moot or thing, the latter appear to have met every few weeks, and we may seem justified in imagining that so too a tua th would have assembled on a more regular basis than an Óenach. At least hypothetically this allows us to see how different scales of assembly could have operated spatially through single landscapes, with local tua th assemblies convened on kin-group burial places and cemeteries regularly, but with a higher-order, more formal assemblies, annual or bi-annual Óenaig, convened less regularly around the core royal locus of activity. This scenario, of course, would have given ample opportunity for the political dimension of supra-local assembly within such landscapes to come to the fore. For instance, Óenaig would undoubtedly have been stage-managed; as much is stated outright in texts like the Airgialla Charter Poem, which refers aspirationally to the arrangement of the major regional kings around the king of Tara at Óenach Tailten (Bhreathnach and Murray 2005:129). A multiplicity of routeways within and through royal estates could have served to choreograph solemn entries, both for a presiding king and subject vassals. Indeed, a sunken routeway in Tatestown defines one such approach from the demesne boundary of Óenach Tailten to Raith Airthir, the principal royal assembly focus within that landscape. Status and rank would also no doubt have been performed through formal and ad hoc processions, as much as within the assembly itself, where the physical ordering of space and personnel represented indicators of status, at least as significant as the hierarchies of speech and silence that defined the solemnities and rancour of the gathering and its associated discourse.

While space does not permit a detailed exploration of these issues here, regarding how these landscapes were implicated in the production of authority, it is worth highlighting that an implication of the fact that cemeteries utilized as local tua th assembly places cluster around royal assembly landscapes and define them is the notion that kings must have exercised a modicum of control over burial and local assembly practices. With reference to the theme of societal norms, there seems a very real possibility that this aspect of royal power, or perhaps more so the exercise of overkingship, is the role that kings played in the mediating dispute between heirs following bereavement and death within a kindred through regulating and over-seeing the redistribution of resources, particularly land. An Old Irish poem edited by D.A. Binchy (1971), for instance, shows that a king was expected to be proficient in things like land-law (cf. Doherty 1985:8). This opens up interesting avenues of enquiry pertaining to both regional differences in power structures and how different scales of identity were constructed and maintained. Indeed, such regionalities may also be explored through contrasting areas where clusters of so-called cemetery settlements—possibly a regional phenomena themselves—suggest centralized assembly practices, with regions, like Inishowen (above), where assembly toponyms indicate more dispersed practices.

Creating Christian Communities: Assembly and Conversion

Returning to the nature of assembly landscapes, some other notable patterns have significant implications for understanding the role of these landscapes within social and religious discourse. Alongside a core royal focus, the propensity for early conversion-period churches to be located within assembly landscapes is such that we may normally expect each assembly landscape to have had at least one church (Gleeson, in press a). The royal estate of Óenach Tailten, for instance, may correspond to the only locations with evidence for early medieval burial within that landscape are located precisely on its boundaries: at Oristown, Kilmainham, and Grange 2 (ibid.). Likewise, an early medieval date for Teltown church is suggested by LiDAR survey that shows the site to be surrounded by a large circular enclosure, while Martry and Donaghpatrick are also documented early ecclesiastical establishments. The latter (Domnach Pátraic), is located immediately adjacent to the principal royal assembly focus of the wider Tailtiu landscape, Raith Airthir, and is intimately associated with this site in hagiography (Bieler 1979:133; Gleeson, in press a; Swift 2000). Domnach churches, moreover, would appear to have a particularly strong association with assembly places; of 115 assembly landscapes mapped in Figure 1, thirty-nine have an associated domnach church (Gleeson 2014:147–160). The importance of this fact is partly the status of these sites as Ireland’s earliest churches; domnach ceased being used as an active toponym by the 7th century, and possibly as early as the 5th–6th century (Charles-Edwards 2000:184–185, Flanagan 1984).

Despite these patterns, Irish kingship is normally depicted as an institution which defied Christianization, and indeed, it has been suggested that early church sites often encircle rather than encroach upon the major royal landscapes (see Bhreathnach 2011:127–134, Schot et al. 2011:ix). While some churches are located around the boundaries of these
landscapes (e.g., Domnach Mór Maige Selca at Carnfree on the boundaries of Óenach Crúachan), this spatial relationship is akin to the burial sites that define these same boundaries, namely sanctifying them for a Christian society. Furthermore, it has become increasingly evident that the rite of east–west-extended inhumation burial in Ireland is a phenomenon of the 5th–6th century at the earliest, and given that it seems this new rite was being used to define the assembly landscapes wherein one also encounters the earliest churches in Ireland, it may be that this rite was likely to be emerging within a Christianizing context (Gleeson 2014, McGarry 2010, Ó Carraigáin 2010). The process of conversion clearly had a profound effect on assembly places and practices as well as the institution of kingship (Gleeson, in press a).

It is worth stating outright that the conjunction of a documented royal assembly locus, early (5th–6th century) burial places and contemporary conversion-period churches (e.g., domnach sites) indicates that the assembly function of these landscapes in Ireland seems likely to be at least as old as the 5th–6th century. At least in some instances, the burial places suggested here as local assembly places may have been redefining pre-existing land-holding units in the 5th–6th century period; the early medieval burials at Holdenstown 1 (Óenach Roigne) were inserted into pre-existing ring-ditches of Iron Age date (Whitty and Tobin 2009), while the complex at Kilmainham, defining the western boundary of Óenach Tailten, was associated with an Iron Age linear ditch (Walsh 2011). Without more detailed analysis, this is no more than a conjecture, but nevertheless, kingship in late Iron Age Ireland was indisputably sacral (see Gleeson 2012; Newman 2007, 2011), and at least in some cases a pre-existing cultic function is testified by, among other things, the votive deposition of Roman material in wells (e.g., at Óenach Tailten; Kelly 2002, Mallery 2011). Furthermore, there is considerable comparative material which indicates that missions were usually directed towards elites (consider various papers in Carver 2003; Gleeson and Ó Carraigáin, in press; Sanmark 2004). As such, it may seem appropriate to imagine that assembly landscapes were the principal venues within which communities debated together the merits of conversion. In the case of Palladius, the first bishop sent by Pope Celestine in 431 to the “Scotti (‘Irish’) believing in Christ” (Charles-Edwards 2000:202–214), there are hints in the geographical associations of Palladius’ reputed followers (Auxilius, Isserninus, and Secundinus) that he led a systematic mission centered on a polity associated with Óenach Carman (Gleeson and Ó Carraigáin, in press). The building of a church in assembly landscapes therefore seems likely to represent the perpetuation of a cultic function through the sanctification of an assembly place for a Christian society.

The propensity for domnach churches to be located in assembly landscapes is intriguing in this regard, as this type of ecclesiastical site was particularly appropriate to assembly places. The nomenclature of these establishments normally signals that they were the principal church of a specific geographical area or a named kin-group (e.g., either Domnach Mór Maige X or Domnach Mór Ua/Uí X). Certainly, this implies pastoral and probably also episcopal obligations (for debates on church organization, see Etchingham 1999). In this regard, the domnach church may seem particularly comparable to the later fylki churches of Scandinavia (cf. Skre 2007:392–396).

While the character of domnach churches perhaps singles them out as exceptionally suited to the functions of assembly places, another type of church site that may be specifically associated with assembly places are martartech churches. While I have encountered only three such securely identifiable churches, all are associated with assembly landscapes: Martry at Óenach Tailten, and two domus marterium establishments mentioned by Tírechán in the late 7th century (Bieler 1979:162–163, Walsh 2003:75), probably identifiable with Dumnurraghail in County Kildare and Kilree (from “church of the king”) near Óenach Roigne (Gleeson, in press a). The term martartech/domus marterium implies that such places housed relics, with similar associations implied elsewhere, for instance, at Baslick (County Roscommon) on the boundaries of Óenach Crúachan (Doherty 1984:304–305; Gleeson, in press a). A likely explanation for the association of churches, relics, and assemblies is the legal role of relics and cemeteries for things like swearing oaths at assemblies and burial places (cf. Kelly 1988:199). The importance of relics to the proceedings of an Óenach is also clearly evident in the Annals of Ulster s.a. 784, which refer to the “adventus of the relics of [St.] Erc into the ciuitas of Tailtiu”. Notably, through the use of adventus, a term used to signify a solemn entry by Emperors into late Roman cities, the annalist articulates an image of assembly places and practices as part of pan-European culture thoroughly influenced by the specter of an Imperial heritage (cf. Kantorowicz 1944), a concept equally as evident in the use of ciuitas to describe Óenach Tailten.

Further evidence that the church had become integrated into structures of assembly from an early date, at least the conversion period, is provided by the fact that church synods could run concurrent with Óenach (Charles-Edwards 2000:287–299, Swift 2000). Indeed, so intimate was the association
of synods with assembly practices that the Latin synodus was borrowed into Irish as senad, eventually coming to be used as a toponym that signified the principal assembly place of some kingdoms.

I have encountered three such instances (Gleeson 2014:879–881, 890), and while it is uncertain how early this borrowing occurred, the best known example of the Shanid, County Limerick, assembly of Uí Fhidgente is documented from the 830s (MacCotter 1990:51).

Clearly therefore, Christianity, including its clerical ritual specialists, were formative in shaping the character of assembly landscapes from at least the conversion period. Thus, it can no longer be denied that the practice of kingship developed within a Christianizing context. Likewise, it appears that clerics encouraged kings to extend their authority in a Christianizing context. Furthermore, the episcopal structure of the early Irish church described a threefold hierarchy of kingship in early Ireland is at least 5th century in origin (above) is a reference in St. Patrick’s confessio to those who judge throughout the regions. Ó Corráin (2010:284–286) has shown this to be a learned reference to paramount kingship after a biblical model. If so, then the judicial powers of paramount Irish kings may seem equally archaic. Furthermore, the episcopal structure of the early Irish church described a threefold hierarchy (see Etchingham 1999), which in this light seems most likely modelled upon its royal counterpart. Thus, while the church may have been formative in shaping the practice of Irish kingship, it is probably more appropriate to envisage early ecclesiastics being co-opted to the process of polity building, rather than according them responsibility for the genesis of synods with assembly practices that the Latin synodus was borrowed into Irish as senad, eventually coming to be used as a toponym that signified the principal assembly place of some kingdoms.
being used for burial (O’Brien 2003, 2009) indicates that important changes in that process were underway. While this is neither a sudden or rapid process, but rather one drawn out over a number of centuries, with some places retaining a burial function into the 10th and 11th century, we are probably justified in inferring that the burial function was being removed to church sites (see Ó Carragáin 2009, 2010). In general, the terminal phase of archaeological sites is difficult to isolate and date, but nevertheless, it is clear that many of these cemeteries remained centers of activity after their burial function ceased, presumably because they retained importance as assembly places. Given the suggestions above that clerics were actively shaping the character of assembly landscapes and burial practices from at least the 5th–6th centuries, it seems unlikely that developments in the burial record from the 8th century reflect the establishment of proper Christian burial practices (pace O’Brien 2003, 2009); rather, the evidence for the regulation of burial reflects how deeply implicated the church was in processes of polity building. The removal of burial from assembly places may be argued to reflect changes in the nature of local identity and how this was articulated relative to more encompassing scales of polity and community. In the main, these changes can be suggested to be directly related to the development of major supra-regional kingdoms in Ireland from ca. 700 onwards (further Gleeson 2014:768–778).

Although full exploration of the latter point is beyond the present paper’s scope, there are examples where the effects of such processes are visible within assembly landscapes. For brevity, I confine myself to a single instance, namely Nenagh, County Tipperary (from “óenach”), which was Óenach Aurman, “the óenach of east Munster”, also known as Óenach Téite. Téite was a mythical female said to have been interred within the assembly mound and in whose memory the games were said to have been convened in Middle Irish literature (cf. Bergholm, in press; Ettlinger 1953). A large cemetery complex at

Figure 5. LiDAR model of Raheennamadra hill, the core focus of Óenach Clochair, Munster’s pre-eminient assembly place. The ring-barrow on the crest of the hill is approached through a (later) northeast–southwest orientated avenue, and has two tall satellite mounds located immediately south. The avenue skirts around a large oval enclosure containing a platform ringfort that was constructed in the second half of the early medieval period, probably as a royal seat.
Carrigatogher-Harding was located on the outskirts of Nenagh, focusing on a natural knoll. This site overlooked a routeway called the Slige Dála, “the road of assembly”; this did indeed connect a number of óenaig, and is therefore perhaps analogous to the Eriksgata of medieval Sweden (cf. Sanmark 2009). While established probably during the 5th–6th century, the Carrigatogher cemetery fell out of use during the 8th century (Taylor 2010). Correspondingly, a natural knoll to the northeast at Tullaheady (Cleary and Kelleher 2011) was “activated” during the late 8th century and converted into a mound by the digging of a ditch around the knoll’s base. This knoll/ mound thereafter became surrounded by a number of rubbish pits, with the fill of the latter and the ditch mainly comprising food waste as well as honestones and whetstones (Cleary and Kelleher 2011:429–431). These pits and food waste, a common feature of assembly places across Europe (e.g., Ødegaard, in press; Sanmark and Semple 2013:519–524), probably represent evidence for periodic feasting, and comparable material is found at other assembly sites in Ireland (Gleeson 2014). Likewise, there was some evidence that the ditch was cleaned out on a regular basis (Cleary and Kelleher 2011:429–431), perhaps related to proscriptions in law tracts that assembly places should be prepared and cleared of things like gorse prior to an óenach (cf. Binchy 1978).

Probably most important point here is the fact that Tullaheady became a center of activity during precisely the same period that the Carrigatogher-Harding burial complex ceased to be a locus of activity. Moreover, both events are contemporary with the emergence of “East Munster” as an administrative entity and district, for which Nenagh was the assembly place (see Gleeson 2014:760–766, in press b). In such a context, it is difficult to resist suggesting that the place-name Tullaheady derives from *Tulach Téite*, “the hillock/mound of Téite” (*a quo Óenach Téite*). Topographically, Tullaheady townland is flat, such that the *tulach* element of the place-name probably refers to a mound/knoll. If *Tulach Téite* is an acceptable hypothesis, then the processes that saw local assembly places like Carrigatogher cease being used for burial entailed the mythologization of landscape, which can probably justifiably be related to the creation of an entity known as “East Munster”. This may be reflected not only in the shift of activity to Tullaheady, but also in the reimagining of the genesis of the assembly function and its commemorative aspect through the invention of a myth of Téite, which served to anchor the landscapes’s ancestral dimension in a fictive and imagined primordial past.

Thus, while Tullaheady represents evidence for the creation of an assembly mound in the 8th century, it also provides a material expression of the discourses pertaining to the function and image of assembly places, including the the role they played in articulating different scales of identity and community. Importantly, this development occurred at a time when the patchwork of local identities which characterized the 5th–7th century geo-political landscape was knit into the evolving superstructure of a tapestry and web of kinship that traced the descent of all the “Irish”, as a single people, back through a biblical narrative of world history to Adam (cf. Ó Corráin 1986, 1998).

**Conclusion**

The present paper has hopefully demonstrated the complex and multifaceted nature of assembly landscapes and the associated practices that defined civil society in early medieval Ireland. In the process, it raises as many questions as it answers. What I hope to have shown, however, is that a critical appraisal of structures and practices of assembly in Ireland can provide important insights into the material apparatus of kingship as well as its ceremonial. Moreover, I have attempted to challenge the predominantly economistic understanding of the óenach by highlighting the degree to which such places and practices were implicated in the exercise of royal power, the constitution of authority, and in the discourses which defined communities and their relationships to one another. In this regard, I hope that the spatial dynamic of authority that is clearly at play in assembly landscapes demonstrates the importance of engaging with royal landscapes in Ireland on a more holistic basis, understanding them as places implicated in discourses of power and place as much as venues that perpetuated coded and archaic ideologies of sacral authority. These places are implicated in the process of conversion and Christianization, and they appear to have been diplomatic spaces that played an integral part in processes of polity building, and the production and maintenance of different scales of polity, community, and identity. Furthermore, in tentatively identifying burial sites as assembly places, I have identified a working model for composing and analyzing how structures and practices of assembly operated through discreet royal landscapes. While this represents a preliminary account of the nature of Irish assembly practices, I hope that it highlights pertinent issues, some tentative patterns, and the uniquely robust and early nature of evidence from Ireland that has a broader relevance for the evolution of assembly practices across northwestern Europe and the significance of such patterns for understanding the evolution of civil society in early medieval Ireland.
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